

The Obsession with Measurement and Construction of Possible Futures in Education

Massimiliano Tarozzi* 

Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna (Italy)

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L'ossessione della misurazione e la costruzione di futuri possibili per l'educazione

Over the last decade, there has been a growing consensus, including in Italy, that it makes sense to provide an objectively measurable empirical basis for educational policies and practices in order to escape from the uncertainty of practices based on individual experience or subjective values. The quantification of the social sphere, the “metric society” (Mau, 2019), and data-driven models of governance have led not only to “learnification”, a culture of performativity and standardised testing as the dominant model (Biesta, 2010), but also to a loss of future-oriented visions as these latter are overwhelmed by statistical models of anticipation. The main aim of this paper is to critique the post-positivist epistemological assumptions of so-called Evidence Based Education as well as the neoliberal organisational models whose indiscriminate application to professionals in education robs these roles of professionalism. Secondly, based on the recent UNESCO report on the “Futures of Education”, it intends to discuss the dimension of the future as a key direction of meaning for educational policies and practices, held up as an alternative to anticipatory governance models (Robertson, 2022).

Nell'ultimo decennio, anche in Italia è cresciuto il consenso intorno alla necessità di fornire una base empirica oggettivamente misurabile alle politiche e alle pratiche educative, per sfuggire all'incertezza delle pratiche basate sull'esperienza individuale o sui valori soggettivi. La quantificazione della sfera sociale, la “società metrica” (Mau, 2019) e i modelli di governance basati sui dati hanno portato non solo al predominio della “learnification”, di una cultura della performatività e dei test standardizzati (Biesta, 2010), ma anche alla perdita di visioni orientate al futuro, in quanto queste ultime sembrano sopraffatte da modelli statistici di anticipazione. L'obiettivo principale di questo articolo è quello di criticare i presupposti epistemologici post-positivisti della cosiddetta Evidence Based Education e i modelli organizzativi neoliberali la cui applicazione indiscriminata ha privato gli insegnanti della loro professionalità. In secondo luogo, sulla base del recente rapporto dell'UNESCO sui Futuri dell'Educazione, intende discutere la dimensione del futuro come direzione di senso fondamentale per le politiche e le pratiche educative, in alternativa ai modelli di governance anticipatoria (Robertson, 2022).

Keywords: Futures of education; Learnification; Evidence-based education; Globalisation and education; Unesco Education Report.

*  massimiliano.tarozzi@unibo.it

1. Introduction

In the last two decades — and over the last decade in Italy as well — in the wake of changes in other areas of welfare, there has been a growing consensus around the idea of providing an objectively measurable empirical basis for educational policies and practices. The aim of this shift is to move away from the arbitrariness of practices based on subjective experience or values.

Evidence-based education, inferred from procedures successfully adopted in the biomedical sciences (Slavin, 2008; Hattie & Vivanet, 2016), is certainly an example of this drive. More generally, education is immersed in a widespread culture of performativity stemming from the mis-application of an economist and corporatist model to formal educational contexts. Examples of this trend include standardized testing, competency-based education reduced to measuring the skills needed to excel in the world of work, the evaluation of university research in terms of measurable “output,” and educational research aimed at identifying what works in education through tools such as randomised controlled trials, systematic literature reviews, and meta-analyses.

This culture of performativity in formal educational contexts tends to deprive teachers of their professionalism and, most of all, their agency (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2019). It demotivates students, causing them to be more and more concerned that they might end up being “losers” in labour market competition. While fostering a false sense of meritocracy, it expands the reach of social injustice and sets up STEM subjects as the prevailing objective and efficient forms of knowledge required for professional success. In this context, ministers of education and university rectors view schools and universities as tools for promoting the growth and formation of a version of human capital suited to meet the human resource needs of the 4th industrial revolution (Bianchi, 2020).

Underlying this shift is a non-neutral political ideology and social and cultural paradigm that scholars have thoroughly mapped in the last twenty years (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Rizvi, Lingard, & Rinne, 2022; Stormquist & Monkman, 2014; Torres, 2014): the culture of measurement. A paradigm I call the “obsession with measurement,” this culture is fuelled by a questionable faith in not only the performative but also the normative value of measuring as a result of which what ends up being measured is limited to what *can be* measured, not what *needs to be* measured.

The shift that has taken hold in Italy, perhaps somewhat later and meeting with greater resistance than in other countries, is the product of the kind of global economic knowledge and “skill strategy” emblematically represented by international organisations such as the OECD and World Bank as well as, in some ways, supranational actors such as the European Commission. These organisations have secured a hegemonic role in crafting national education policies thanks specifically to their ability to control and manage a systematic, objective and incontrovertible data base such as the comparative findings of PISA tests and the assessment of educational systems around the world periodically presented in *Education at a glance* reports. Taking centre stage since the 1990s thanks to substantial U.S. funding, the OECD has replaced UNESCO as the international benchmark organisation states use to formulate their education policy.

On the basis of insights offered by Biesta (2010), in this article I would like to very briefly consider the political discourse behind this objectively measurable culture of performativity: neoliberalism. Subsequently, however, I would like to show how certain signs seem to point to a breakdown in this ideology of economicist knowledge. Next, following analyses carried out by Susan Robertson, I seek to demonstrate that this breakdown is granting international bodies a newly key role as “guardians of the future” (Robertson, 2022). Finally, given space constraints, I will hint at the aspect of the future, on the basis of the latest UNESCO Report, as an unavoidable direction of meaning for educational policies and practices.

2. Globalisation and its backlash

It is well known by now that the turn towards a computationally-based paradigm in education is the consequence of the insinuating influence of neoliberal policies in education, a trend even post-Marxist progressive parties have supported. This influence is also characterised by the globalisation of processes, not surprisingly promoted, supported and disseminated by international organisations.

Rizvi & Lingard's 2010 analysis of the impact of global dynamics on national educational policies is impeccable (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). While in the past education policies were the prerogative of nation states, policy making in this area has been progressively taken over by international bodies such as OECD and even UNESCO, although of course national policy-making has never completely disappeared.

The financial globalisation prevailing in today's world is the other face of this neoliberal transformation, determining a precise political agenda that Pahlsgren (2011) has called the global education reform movement (GERM). The aim of GERM is to expand the autonomy of schools with a view to reducing the role played by the state, favouring families' freedom to choose, and setting up reliable bases of comparison among the performance of students, schools and educational systems as a whole.

Characterised as the "learnification" of educational processes by Gert Biesta (2010), this shift transforms an educational vocabulary into a language of instruction that brings with it the aforementioned culture of or obsession with measurement and culture of performativity in which the criteria used to measure and evaluate efficiency and productivity in the private business sector are applied to formal schooling.

The pervasive presence of the idea of accountability in policy, but increasingly in the everyday lives of schools and universities as well, has gone hand in hand with a globalisation of education centred on the myth that operationalised principles of competitiveness constitute a terrific tool for generating better results, or "outcomes," among students and teachers alike.

This shift has brought with it a celebration of objective measurement and the perception that we are living in what Mau calls a "metric society" (Mau, 2019) in which everything is datafied, especially policies based on the predictive models typical of financial analysis, and planners pursue an anticipatory logic built on statistical models of prediction. The impact of this trend on formal educational practices has been overwhelming, summarisable in the phenomenon Shore & Wright (1999, 2015) call "audit culture": the individual and organisational effects of taking a set of techniques based on calculative rationality, inferred from other, remote sectors (especially financial accountability and new public management), and applying it to sectors such as education.

Over the last decade, however, something has changed and we begin to see the first (partial) challenges to the prevailing neoliberal globalisation model.

Under the pressure of multiple phenomena and new events that undermine neoliberal discourse, the neoliberal globalisation narrative has begun to reveal its weak points:

1. A new global order is emerging that is no longer centred solely on the monolithic hegemony of Anglo-American values and U.S. power created after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The assertion of Asia on the geopolitical chessboard has played a particularly major role in this shift.
2. There is a growing awareness about environmental issues and climate change as well as the dominant countries' responsibility for having failed to take effective action.
3. It has become widely evident that there are profound inequalities within and between nations. While the gap between rich and poor continues to widen, the recognition of these inequalities exist has become part of a common awareness.
4. Forms of anti-globalisation-oriented nationalism, ethnonationalism and right-wing populism have resurfaced, a point I will return to shortly.
5. Finally, despite its devastating effects on students, the COVID-19 pandemic has effectively pointed to alternative ways of conceptualising nation-states' roles in managing risk and coordinating certain social institutions. These include healthcare systems but also education, systems that have displayed an astonishing ability to respond at the national level.

All of these developments, along with others, prove that today's world is no less interconnected; indeed, it is perhaps even more so thanks to the massive use of artificial intelligence. Nonetheless, neoliberal market rhetoric alone no longer explains this interconnectedness and seems even less effective in governing it, on its own.

To be clear, the forces of neoliberal globalisation still prevail, especially in educational policies. However, cracks and alternative scenarios are also emerging, even though (such as in the case of radical right-wing resurgence) they may not always be preferable. Italy, the first founding country of the EU to be governed by the most intensely right-wing administration since Fascism, is sadly emblematic. This resurgence reflects a trend that extends beyond Italy and indeed Europe, to encompass India, Russia, a number of Latin American countries, and the United States with its lingering Trumpism.

As Fazal Rizvi (2022) notes, nationalist right-wing movements seem to have appropriated the critiques raised by progressive no-global scholars and movements against globalisation and its resultant economic inequalities in the 1990s. The fundamental difference is that these new right-wing currents have adopted such critiques without questioning the structural assumptions of financial capitalism underlying neoliberal globalisation, instead attacking migrants, refugees, and newly-gained civil rights. They thus end up bolstering neoliberal rationality while also endowing it with nationalist revanchism.

In the next section I will show that this partial dethroning of the neoliberal discourse on globalisation can also be seen in the changing roles of certain global actors, in particular the international political institutions that have been so prominent in promoting globally comparative visions of education since World War II, thereby displacing nation states from what was traditionally their exclusive purview.

3. Foreseeing futures

Susan Robertson (2022) has observed that the OECD's role has changed since 2010, especially in terms of its power to influence national education policy through predictions based on immense masses of comparative school performance data (the PISA tests, for example) or analysis of education policies (the *Education at a glance* reports). The fact is that, when the predicted future arrives and predictive models prove inaccurate, their "promissory legitimacy" (a legitimacy based on foreseeing future scenarios) is undermined because the future forecasted with these sophisticated statistical tools simply has not materialised. The result is a change of strategy, similar to that adopted in the same period by UNESCO, the OECD's historic rival in the role of international organisation as *guardian of the future* in education. UNESCO has had a major influence on education policy over the past 50 years, foreshadowing reform trajectories mainly through its two reports on education: the 1972 Faure and 1996 Delors reports about which Biesta has provided illuminating insights (Biesta, 2022).

In 2021, UNESCO published its 3rd report, *Reimagining our Futures Together: a new social contract for education*, explicitly mentioning the future in the title. The commission that drafted the report, chaired by President of the Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Sahle-Work Zewde, asserts that a global perspective on education requires an ethos imbued with hope, framing hope as a political virtue enabling us to envision possible worlds and lay the foundations for a transformative pedagogy.

The report also argues that, to create peaceful, just and sustainable futures, education itself must be transformed through a profound change in the system of relations between men and women, but also between humankind and the planet and between humans and technology. This idea of the future is very different from the one envisioned by the anticipatory OECD and neoliberal models, and indeed these arguments implicitly criticise the errors of neoliberalism. It is no coincidence that, although the report's tone is politically neutral, among the few authors it cites are critical anti-neoliberal pedagogy champions Paulo Freire and bell hooks.

According to the report, it is essential that we rebuild solidarity-based, cooperative and socially just networks to repair the wounds caused by deep inequalities within and between nations, compensate for the injustices generated by gender inequality, and counter power asymmetries more generally (Tarozzi & Milana, 2022). Above all, however, it promotes a decolonising vision of North-South relations beginning with a decolonial redefinition of the shared knowledge enshrined in school curricula.

In the same period, the OECD launched a project called the *Future of Education and Skills 2030* that echoes in many ways the futurological approach undertaken by UNESCO since World War II. The first phase of the project aims to identify the set of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that today's students need to shape their world in 2030 and how educational systems should be reformed to make this change possible. In particular, the OECD proposed the *Learning Compass 2030* (OECD, 2015)

as a guiding tool to help students “to learn to navigate by themselves through unfamiliar contexts, and find their direction in a meaningful and responsible way” (OECD, 2015, p. 7).

Susan Robertson has observed that both UNESCO and OECD changed their strategies for envisioning the future, proposing “anticipatory strategies” aimed at setting themselves up as “guardians of the future.” However, while OECD’s future vision intensely emphasises individual responsibility and agency so young people can assert themselves in future scenarios, UNESCO embraced a global educational perspective based on global social justice; furthermore, instead of focusing on individual global skills, it continues to endorse an idea of global citizenship with potential political and transformative value, albeit one that lends itself to multiple, divergent interpretations (Tarozzi & Torres, 2016; Pashby, da Costa, Stein, & Andreotti, 2020).

The prophetic activity of these two international bodies, emblematic for the discussion unfolding in this special issue, foreshadows two different — and in many ways conflicting — ideas of the future that in turn inevitably grant different meanings to the idea of educational hope.

UNESCO appears to be non-politically neutral (Elfert & Morris, 2022) and, although it does not explicitly critique neoliberal capitalism, it does propose a *philosophy of the future* (Robertson, 2022) that is critical, transformative and oriented towards social justice. Invoking Appadurai, who not surprisingly was part of the committee that wrote the report, we could say that the future UNESCO proposes is a cultural factor which embraces an *ethics of possibility* rather than an *ethics of probability*. It is the latter, in contrast, that characterises the ethics foretold by OECD.

According to Appadurai, ethics of probability refers to ways of thinking, feeling and acting that derive from accountability regimes, the obsession with measurement and the datafication of experience, including educational experiences. Ethics of possibility, on the other hand, entails:

those ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that increase the horizons of hope, that expand the field of the imagination, that produce greater equity in what I have called the capacity to aspire, and that widen the field of informed, creative, and critical citizenship. This ethics is part and parcel of transnational civil society movements, progressive democratic organizations, and in general the politics of hope (Appadurai, 2013, p. 295).

In this vision, in which the future represents a cultural factor, education plays an important role in imagining possible futures and strengthening students’ “capacity to aspire.” It must be noted, however, that the capacity to aspire and hope itself are not equally distributed; the poor, vulnerable and marginalised struggle to build aspirations for a better world. In other words, empowerment must be viewed as a social and collective capacity and, as such, be promoted politically.

The capacity to aspire evokes the theme of this special issue and the need to rediscover the meaning of education, an issue dear to anyone who identifies with a phenomenological framework.

4. Concluding remarks

After pointing out some of the effects of neoliberal globalisation and the move to introduce a culture of performativity and measurement into educational processes, in this short paper I have critically examined two visions of the future, one based on an *ethics of possibility* the other on an *ethics of probability*.

The horizons of possibility are also the horizons of the meaning of educating; they affect the future dimension. A future that is possible rather than probable, however, determined by the aspirations of men and women and not predicted by statistical models or artificial intelligence algorithms.

Since futures cannot be pre-determined, to build a possible future rather than a merely probable one it is essential that each and every student be educated in the capacity to aspire. This capacity may also be defined, following Bloch, as hope (Bloch, 1957/1986). Indeed, Bloch offers a full-fledged encyclopaedia of hope in which he invites us not to take the world for granted but rather, precisely through hope, to make the effort to see *how* things move in the world, what direction they are evolving in. Besides its value for critiquing the present, this makes hope a cognitive as well as political act of foreseeing that which is not yet defined.

In educational terms, therefore, constructing the future requires a pedagogy of hope (Tarozzi & Bourn, in press) for imagining possible futures and building them.

We are reminded here of the pedagogy of hope outlined by the late visionary Freire who, unlike abstract utopian idealisms that create only illusion and an acceptance of the present (“just to hope is to hope in vain”), invokes hope as “an existential, concrete imperative” (Freire, 1992/2021, p. 2). It also recalls the existential optimism theorised by Bertolini (2021) as a positive predisposition towards the future, the intrinsic capacity of every authentic educational practice to prefigure possible futures in every educational experience and in all the subjects it seeks to educate.

At the same time, however, it is also a fundamental objective of (re)education, understood by Bertolini as “that sense of fulfilment derived from imagining ourselves at the outset of a project of investing meaning in the world, [a project] with the power to materialise beginning from the constraints imposed by reality and through a practice of negotiating meaning with others” (Bertolini & Caronia, 1993, p. 123 [our translation]).

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Massimiliano Tarozzi – Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna (Italy)

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4354-9728>

✉ massimiliano.tarozzi@unibo.it

Full Professor of General and Social Pedagogy, Department of Philosophy and Communication Studies, University of Bologna, he heads the UNESCO Chair in Global Citizenship Education in Higher Education and coordinates the Academic Network on Global Education and Learning (ANGEL).