Beyond the Tyranny of Testing: towards a relational orientation to educational evaluation

SCHERTO GILL

ABSTRACT During the COVID-19 lockdown, schools are closed, exams have been cancelled, and teaching and learning are taking an unprecedented form. In this process, two realities are brought to light. On the one hand, the pandemic highlights the widening gaps in society and the part that the educational system plays in privileging students from advantageous backgrounds, and discriminating and marginalising other students who are already vulnerable. On the other hand, it also illustrates that without the constraint and pressure of exams, students and teachers are provided with an opportunity to collaborate and co-create meaningful learning experiences. In this article, the author suggests that the gaps can be addressed and the potential of innovation can be enhanced if post-COVID education is liberated from the system of production, marked by standardisation and supported by tests and grades. To move beyond the tyranny of testing, the author proposes a relational orientation to educational evaluation which is formative and transformative.

The COVID-19 pandemic unmasks the glaring inequalities in our society, where, without the structural support of schooling, students who are already disadvantaged socially, economically and culturally are finding themselves further excluded from education. The risks that vulnerable children are exposed to include neglect, starvation, loneliness, mental ill-being, and physical and psychological abuse (Maguire, 2020). Young people already at risk are further endangered by homelessness, financial difficulties and gang exploitation (National Youth Agency, 2020), as well as Internet abuse, cyber-bullying and sexual exploitation (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2020). At the same time, during the COVID-19 lockdown, new approaches to education have been observed. As exams are cancelled and the usual pressure to perform according to standardised measures relaxes, for some students and their

393

teachers, education continues in truly creative ways. Curriculum contents are drawn both locally and globally (aided by digital technology); engagement is mixed-age (involving siblings, parents and even grandparents); and learning becomes inquiry- and project-based. Students are mutually supportive (mostly through social media), and teachers and students review their learning relationally and collaboratively in dialogue with others. No longer constrained by attaining grades, schooling outside of traditional classrooms can be enriching and enjoyable.

For many students, the exposed inequalities and social injustice, and the opportunity for unimpeded learning, have inspired more fascination about the connection between the nature of our society, our collective ways of being and how we must care for each other better. Likewise, they begin to consider the intersection between health, well-being, climate crisis, the state of the planet and their own future. Above all, the pandemic has prompted much imagination of the post-COVID world and the redesigning of education. How might education contribute to an inclusive and caring society? What kind of schooling would sustain students' enthusiasm and thirst for learning? How might teaching and learning be restructured to continue to kindle students' passions for world-making? Indeed, these questions have been the focus of dialogue at all levels. Amongst those who join in the imagination of a post-COVID world is the French philosopher Bruno Latour. Latour identifies the greatest transformation to be the overcoming of our current system, which he terms a 'system of production'. In a recent interview with the *Guardian*, Latour says:

> What we need is not only to modify the system of production but to get out of it altogether ... The pandemic has shown us ... a very narrow and limited way of organising life and deciding who is important and who is not important. If I could change one thing, it would be to get out of the system of production. (Watts, 2020)

The system of production has long been identified as what hinders education from being inclusive and caring (Gottesman, 2016). This is because it interrupts the meaningful relational process that should underpin teaching and learning, as well as education as a whole. Under the system of production, education is structured around standardisation, perpetuated by summative assessment and through testing and grading. Such a system encourages competition, privileges students from advantageous backgrounds in our society, and alienates others who are already vulnerable. So, to imagine a post-COVID education, in this article I first reflect on the possibility of education being liberated from the system of production. I then set out to address the question with illustrations: How might we go about educational evaluation beyond the tyranny of testing? To conclude, I imagine how education can be systemically transformed once it is free from standardisation.

Testing and the System of Production

Although standardisation is intended to ensure institutional accountability with a view to improving the quality of education, summative assessment through tests and grades has long dominated teaching and learning at all levels. Inadvertently, it has become the sole purpose of education (Kohn, 2000; Jones et al, 2003). Critics have hence equated our assessment system of tests and grades with a process of manufacturing *products* in a long-standing metaphor of *schools as factories* (Jacobs, 2014). It is further reinforced by a system of control, which judges the usefulness of teaching and learning only in terms of their ultimate utility in maximising profit and the accumulation of capital. At a most general level, schooling thus conceived carries an inherent tendency to instrumentalise human beings and human activities, treating students and learning as a means to the ends of economic growth (Gill & Thomson, 2012). As Latour suggests, it is part of a larger system of production around which our society is organised (Watts, 2020). This system already decides who is important and who does not matter, and it follows the principle of 'survival of the fittest', rewarding those who perform better and punishing those who are not able to do so.

Unsurprisingly, standardised testing becomes counterproductive for students. With mounting pressure to attain good grades, some struggle with apathy and low motivation, some confront the resultant mental ill-health, and others give up on education and drop out of schooling altogether (Harley, 2016; Brooks, 2019). The scheme of standardisation that is intended to monitor educational practices to ensure that *every child matters* is precisely the one that is pushing deprived children and young people further into the margins. Teachers also suffer from the demands of standardisation and the measurement of their performance through the test scores of their students (Hoffman, 2003). Many teachers are forced to leave the profession because they refuse to participate in such a dehumanising system.

There is no doubt that learning necessarily involves and even requires formative evaluation. All learners naturally seek feedback on their learning and want to review their learning processes and evaluate progress. The same applies to teachers, who are interested in knowing how students respond to their pedagogical strategies and approaches, and in what ways these might have enhanced students' learning. More importantly, teachers are already motivated in finding out how to improve themselves professionally. Thus, evaluation is integral to learning, teaching and teachers' professional development. Equally, evaluation is necessary for a school community to gain insights into how teaching and learning contribute to its overall aim of education and students' well-being.

Clearly, the educational evaluation desired here cannot be fulfilled by exams and grades. Instead, formative evaluation must be relational in its intentions, processes, practices and effects. In fact, during the pandemic, it is precisely this relational orientation of teaching, learning and evaluation that has been accentuated, experienced by some students and their teachers and missed

by others. The widespread condemnation of the inequalities and injustices, and our spontaneous extending of help and care to others, further emphasises a collective yearning for human connections and the relational nature of our being. How do we return the relational to educational evaluation?

A Relational Orientation to Educational Evaluation

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, education is not a transactional phenomenon but a relational one. Its 2030 vision for education is thus rooted in human community and our interrelationships. It has long been argued that it is within the process of relating that the world comes to be what it is for us (Gergen, 2009). We draw from relational processes our understandings of the world, meanings and values, which, in turn, shape our moral and ethical horizons and inform our actions. Equally, it is within the process of relating that learning is animated and inspired (Gergen & Gill, 2020). A relational process characterises and underlies our being, learning and becoming together. At the same time, from this relational vantage point, and as illustrated by our shared experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, humans are not to be conceptualised as absolutely separate individuals who exist prior to the relational process and who then form relationships with each other. Instead, we are already constituted in the relational process, and the relational is in part comprised in our well-being. All are subject to the relational flow, and all participate in the relational flow, including persons, institutions, systems and societies.

Within the relational flow, there are some activities that can contribute *generatively* to the relational process itself, and to the well-being of the participants. Many forms of dialogue and collaboration are illustrative of this because they not only prioritise the relational orientation in the practice, but can also further enrich the relational process itself and contribute to the relational flourishing of the participants and the community. By contrast, other activities can disrupt the relational process, with *degenerative* effects on the participants. In the present case, these are standardisation, summative assessment, and testing and grading. These latter activities are degenerative because they subvert the very process of relating on which education and human flourishing depend.

Given the relational vision of our life and the relational orientation in education, how are we to envision schooling that replaces testing with this relational alternative? How might it be realised in practice? In what way might the relational processes make a difference to students' learning, teachers' growth and the educational system as a whole? As discussed, I refer to this orientation as *relational evaluation*. I have intentionally chosen the term 'evaluation' as opposed to such terms as 'assessment', 'measurement' or 'appraisal'. This is because the latter terms all carry strong connotations of independent and objective judgement (Gill & Thomson, 2012), and imply that education is best achieved through hierarchies, with the students at the bottom, whose life is

subject to the power of control from an early age. By contrast, as we shall see, the notion of evaluation is values-based and situated in the relational process.

A relational orientation to educational evaluation is characterised by two key defining features. The first is to define evaluation as valuing (Gergen & Gill, 2020). This is also to join others in stressing educational evaluation as a process of valuing or appreciating the values in the activities of teaching and learning (Gitlin & Smyth, 1989). In so doing, evaluation can replace the emphasis on student deficiency with a focus on the potentialities, possibilities and opportunities for growth and well-being. Valuing helps affirm students' intrinsic worthwhileness as persons, and support them to develop and grow from their strengths, thus fostering hope and engagement. Valuing privileges appreciative approaches (Cooperrider et al, 2001), and nourishes the valuable aspects of educative activities and experiences (Gill & Thomson, 2012, 2016).

The second is to conceive evaluation as co-inquiring (Gergen & Gill, 2020). Evaluation can be understood as a shared process whereby students and teachers (as well as administrators and families) collaboratively inquire into the values and valuable aspects of the educative activities and experiences. It therefore cannot simply be a fixing of a grade on a child for a piece of work, or a judgement placed on a student for a particular exam performance. Instead, evaluation involves collective inquiry, in which students and teachers enter into a dialogic exploration aimed at identifying the meaningfulness of learning and teaching, and appreciating how it contributes to students' growth and well-being. These two conceptual features together suggest that relational evaluation should be aimed at non-instrumental ends and rooted in a common recognition of educational aims as the holistic flourishing and well-being of all students (see Dewey, 1987).

Aims of Relational Evaluation

In their current form, summative assessment practices such as exams and grades primarily serve the purposes of surveillance, control and gate-keeping. This model belongs to the factory metaphor, which treats education as production, thereby instrumentalising learning and dehumanising students and teachers. By contrast, a formative and relational orientation to evaluation engages children, young people and their teachers as active participants in learning and sense-making. As highlighted above, it appreciates the intrinsic values of teaching and learning, and, in turn, respects all those involved in the inquiring process as equal dialogic partners.

Relational evaluation serves three interconnected aims. The first is to *enhance the learning process*. If learning (and students' development and well-being) is the primary focus of education, then forms of evaluation should principally promote and improve the learning process(es). Since students' enthusiasm, curiosity, interest and care for learning tend to derive from the relational process, in co-inquiring its meanings and values relationally, the learning process is necessarily enlivened. Without a relational orientation,

summative assessment can reduce learning to preparing for exams, and thus fails to animate the learning process.

The second aim is to *inspire sustained learning engagement*. Learning must never terminate at the end of a unit, a course or an academic year, but is necessarily ongoing and lifelong. In its emphasis on co-inquiry, dialogue and collaboration, relational evaluation can enable students to realise the significance of their ongoing learning adventures, and sustain their continued participation in learning. Summative assessment seldom achieves these goals, as test scores or grades conclude and even close off interest or motivation for more engagement.

The third aim is to *enrich relational flourishing*. Evaluation ought to enrich our relational flourishing in the classroom, within the school and beyond. When the emphasis is on forms of relating embedded in the evaluative process, evaluation can breathe life into the relational process that is central to learning. Summative assessment through testing, grades and judgement creates a subject-to-object relationship, and a regime of reward and punishment, thus undermining trust, friendship and authenticity, and causing anxiety, alienation and antagonism.

The next question is how might these three aims of relational evaluation be realised in the classroom and the school community? What practices are available for pursuing relational evaluation?

Relational Evaluation in Practice

Despite the overwhelming pressure of teaching to the test, many teachers have been continuously integrating relational processes in education and, in some cases, in educational evaluation. Existing classroom practices, for example, include joint project investigation, dialogic reflection and deliberation on learning, collaborative feedback, appreciative inquiry and more. To illustrate and amplify the potentials of relational evaluation, I briefly discuss practices within four contexts: the first two are classroom practices in primary and secondary education; the third is a relational approach that is applicable to the evaluation of teaching; and the last is an integrated approach in the context of school evaluation. Due to the limited space, I will outline the practices without going into a detailed discussion.

Relational Evaluation Practices in Primary Classrooms

There is an abundant amount of literature that emphasises the importance of relational processes in childhood and primary education (for example, Alexander, 2004; Wood, 2007). Featured are joyful unstructured time and play; safe, supportive and stimulating environments; open-ended exploration and inquiry; an intimate and warm connection with adults; friendship with peers; and nourishing relationships in families, schools and the community (see also Alexander, 2018). These provide fertile ground to explore relationally rich

evaluative practices in primary schools. Examples of such practices include learning-review meetings (Swann et al, 2012), formative feedback (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2015), circle time reflection and deliberation (Gergen & Gill, 2020), portfolio work (Jones, 2012), peer feedback (Boon, 2016) and project exhibitions (Malaguzzi, 1996). These practices involve dialogue, reflective questioning and peer collaboration, and, in so doing, are sensitive to children's diverse needs, foster their curiosities, invite continuing interest in learning and, above all, support myriad classroom relationships.

Relational Evaluation Practices in Secondary Classrooms

Adolescence marks a special time when young people live in a space between two worlds: a child's world of physical immaturity and social dependency and an adult's world of a fully developed body and interdependence with peers. At such a time, relational processes become central to young people's development and learning. Secondary education can provide much needed social-emotional nourishment for adolescents by integrating relational evaluation. Significant practices include the Personal Record of School Experience, pioneered by the Sutton Centre in Nottingham; the I/you/we approach to learning reviews (Gallin, 2010); Harkness's method of dialogue and self-evaluation (Heskel & Dyer, 2008); the learning agreement, advanced by the self-managed-learning movement (Cunningham & Bennett, 2000); and other more traditional practices such as learning journals (Moon, 2004), peer evaluation (Sengupta, 1998) and portfolio evaluation (Linström, 2005). Evaluative practices such as these respect young people's need for relational support and cultivate their responsibility for learning. Further, they care for their well-being and attend to their voices, thus inviting their participation and agency in determining the direction of their personal development.

Relational practices in the classroom can enable formative approaches to evaluation to be personalised, rather than one size fitting all (Gergen & Gill, 2020). They are neither judgemental nor punitive, and yet they can enable students to become more open to engage in critical reflection on both their strengths and weaknesses, and actively seek feedback from adults and peers to improve the quality of their learning. They hence hold the potential for stimulating motivation for learning and providing spaces for genuine creativity (Robinson & Aronica, 2016).

Relational Practices in the Evaluation of Teaching

Evaluative practices can determine teachers' well-being, their sense of personhood, how they identify themselves professionally, and the meaningfulness they experience in teaching and learning, all of which are rooted in the relationships and relational contexts where they work. Standardised formats and the use of students' exam performances as indicators of teachers' efficacy have done little to improve teaching; on the contrary, they

tend to generate stress, a sense of oppression and ill-being amongst teachers. By contrast, relational approaches to the evaluation of teaching through co-inquiry, reflection, dialogue and continuous learning can support teachers' professional development and well-being. Practices that are particularly relationally enriching are those that tend to involve peer evaluation (Chism, 2007; Msila, 2009), team teaching and peer mentoring (Nilsson & Driel, 2010), co-inquiry in collaboration with students (Gergen & Gill, 2020), and an action-research cycle to improve teaching (Mertier, 2016). Good teaching embraces a community where these multitudes of relationships are played out dynamically and lived out in the classroom and beyond. The same is true with the evaluation of teaching, which is in part an inquiry into and reflection on these relationships and the unfolding lives of teachers and students in the community through conversations and dialogues. The ripple effects can be far-reaching.

Relational Practices in School Evaluation

From a relational standpoint, the evaluation of schools also involves co-inquiry, listening and dialogue. Take New Zealand's national practice as an example. All schools in the country are expected to take part in an 'ongoing, cyclical process of evaluation and inquiry for improvement' (Education Review Office, 2016, p. 6). These periodical evaluations include an emphasis on students' learning and achievement, the school's priorities for progress, and actions for innovation and improvement. Most saliently, this evaluative practice integrates the school's self-review and stresses both participatory and collaborative processes. It respects the specificities of individual school communities, thus enabling school evaluation to be tailored to the contexts within which the community's interests and needs arise. Another example is whole-school inquiry as an alternative to the measurement-based accountability agenda of school inspection. It invites all stakeholders in the school to participate in a collective reflection on the school's progress, and envision together how to advance the aims of education and support students' learning and well-being. Combining questionnaires, interviews and focus-group dialogue, whole-school inquiry can inspire the community's curiosity about its processes, potentials and needs for change (Gergen & Gill, 2020). A sense of collective responsibility is thus invited.

In spite of their brevity, these illustrations of practice offer a sense of how relational evaluation can be a meaningful alternative to the toxicity of summative assessments, measurement and performance ratings. The final question is: Will these invitations be enough to open the door to systemic transformation in education?

Systemic Transformation in Education

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique opportunity to envision a new future for education. In the case of educational transformation, relational evaluation represents an especially important step forward. However, the

possibilities presented here will not be embraced without criticism and even resistance. Some may point out that we cannot ignore the fact that the pandemic has interrupted all exams and thereby left many young people in a state of limbo. Some may express genuine concerns for the need of 'evidence' for further and higher education admissions, and general educational qualifications and certifications, which are key to work and employment. Others may say that, without exams and grades offering pathways for social mobility, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds will have no chance to escape the cycles of deprivation. Clearly, these concerns do not undermine a relational orientation to education, but they voice the need for systemic transformation in education.

These concerns also invite us to return to where I started in this article – in Latour's words, 'to get out of the system of production' (Watts, 2020). In our case, how might a relational orientation help shift the three interlocking pillars of education – evaluation, curriculum and pedagogy (Bernstein, 1971)? Clearly, the integration of digital technology already points to the possibility of co-created and emergent curricula. Likewise, the recognition of teaching as being beyond the transmission of knowledge and skills opens the door to innovative pedagogies of co-inquiry, dialogue and collaboration. Transformation in our collective cultural lives further lends itself to the development of relational processes in learning communities beyond school walls. Especially inspiring is the Cities of Learning initiative, which started in Chicago and is now spreading to the United Kingdom and elsewhere in the world. To a certain extent, the system of production that Latour hopes to abolish has started to disintegrate from within.

Hence, in a relational orientation also lies an invitation to join a global exploration of its potential for humans' being, becoming and co-flourishing.

References

Alexander, R. (2004) Excellence, Enjoyment and Personalised Learning: a true foundation for choice? *Education Review*, 18(1), 15-33.

Alexander, R. (2018) Developing Dialogue: genesis, process, trial, *Research Papers in Education*, 33(5), 361-398. https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2018.1481140

Bernstein, B. (1971) *Class, Codes and Control: theoretical studies towards a sociology of language*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Boon, S.-I. (2016) Increasing the Uptake of Peer Feedback in Primary School Writing: findings from an action research enquiry, *Education 3-13*, 44(2), 212-222. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2014.901984

Brooks, K. (2019) We Have Ruined Childhood, *New York Times*, 18 August.

Chism, N. (2007) *Peer Review of Teaching: a sourcebook*. 2nd edn. Bolton, MA: Anker.

Cooperrider, D., Sorenson, P., Whitney, D. & Yeager, T. (2001) *Appreciative Inquiry: an emerging direction for organization development*. Champaign, IL: Stipes.

Cunningham, I. & Bennett, B. (2000) *Self-Managed Learning in Action: putting SML into practice*. London: Routledge.

Dewey, J. (1897) My Pedagogic Creed, *School Journal*, 54, 77-80.

Education Review Office (ERO) (2016) *School Evaluation Indicators: effective practice for improvement and learner success*. Wellington, New Zealand: ERO.

Gallin, P. (2010) Dialogic Learning: from an educational concept to daily classroom teaching. http://www.ecswe.eu/wren/documents/Article3GallinDialogicLearning.pdf

Gergen, K.J. (2009) *Relational Being: beyond self and community*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gergen, K.J. & Gill, S.R. (2020) *Beyond the Tyranny of Testing: relational evaluation in education*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gill, S. & Thomson, G. (2012) *Rethinking Secondary Education: a human-centred approach*. London: Pearson.

Gill, S. & Thomson, G. (2016) *Human-Centred Education: a practical guide and handbook*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315454214

Gitlin, A. & Smyth, J. (1989) *Teacher Evaluation: educative alternatives*. London: Falmer Press.

Gottesman, I. (2016) *The Critical Turn in Education*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315769967

Harley, N. (2016) Exam Stress among Causes of Teen Suicide, *Telegraph*, 26 May.

Heskel, J. & Dyer, D. (2008) *After the Harkness Gift: a history of Phillips Exeter Academy since 1930*. Exeter: Phillips Exeter Academy.

Hoffman, B. (2003) *The Tyranny of Testing*. Mineola, NY: Dover.

Jacobs, J. (2014) Beyond the Factory Model, *Education Next*, 14(4), 34-41.

Jones, J. (2012) Portfolios as 'Learning Companions' for Children and a Means to Support and Assess Language Learning in the Primary School, *Education 3-13*, 40(4), 401-416. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2012.691374

Jones, M.G., Jones, B.D. & Hargrove, T.Y. (2003) *The Unintended Consequences of High-Stakes Testing*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Kohn, A. (2000) *The Case against Standardized Testing: raising the scores, ruining the schools*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Linström, L. (2005) The Multiple Uses of Portfolio Assessment, *Studies in Educational Policy and Educational Philosophy*, 1, 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1080/16522729.2005.11803898

Maguire, K. (2020) *COVID-19: the impact on children and families*. Belfast: Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action.

Malaguzzi, L. (1996) *The Hundred Languages of Children: the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Mertier, C.A. (2016) *Action Research: improving schools and empowering educators*. 5th edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483396484

Moon, J. (2004) *A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning*. London: Routledge.

Msila, V. (2009) Peer Evaluation: teachers evaluating one another for an effective practice, *International Journal of Learning*, 6(6), 541-557. https://doi.org/10.18848/1447-9494/CGP/v16i06/46328

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2015) *Formative Feedback: focus on learning*. Dublin: NCCA.

National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) (2020) Online Safety during the Coronavirus Pandemic. https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/news/2020/may/online-safety-during-coronavirus

National Youth Agency (NYA) (2020) *Out of Sight: vulnerable young people – Covid-19 response*. Leicester: NYA.

Nilsson, P. & Driel, J. van (2010) Teaching Together and Learning Together – Primary Science Student Teachers' and Their Mentors' Joint Teaching and Learning in the Primary Classroom, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26, 1309-1318. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2010.03.009

Robinson, K. & Aronica, L. (2016) *Creative Schools: the grassroots revolution that's transforming education*. New York: Penguin.

Sengupta, S. (1998) Peer Evaluation: 'I am not the teacher', *ELT Journal*, 52(1), 19-28. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/52.1.19

Swann, M., Peacock, A., Hart, S. & Drummond, M. (2012) *Creating Learning without Limits*. London: Open University Press.

Watts, J. (2020) Bruno Latour: 'This is a global catastrophe that has come from within', *Guardian*, 6 June. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/06/bruno-latour-coronavirus-gaia-hypothesis-climate-crisis

Wood, E. (2007) Reconceptualising Child-Centred Education: contemporary directions in policy, theory and practice in early childhood, *FORUM*, 49(1), 119-135. https://doi.org/10.2304/forum.2007.49.1.119

SCHERTO GILL is a Senior Fellow at the Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace (GHFP) Research Institute. Dr Gill is also a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for International Education, University of Sussex.
Correspondence: scherto.gill@ghfp.org

404