Book Reviews

Beyond the Tyranny of Testing: Relational Evaluation in Education

KENNETH GERGEN and SCHERTO GILL, 2020

Oxford: Oxford University Press

208pp, hardback, £22.99, ISBN: 9780190872762

This book details what's wrong with the current exam-focused approach to educational assessment and offers a viable counter-vision. A distinction is drawn at once between what the authors term 'educational evaluation', and the all-too-common processes surrounding high-stakes summative testing, which they term 'assessment'. I think of assessment as encompassing much that the authors understand by 'evaluation', so I had to readjust my definitions as I read. Leaving aside this slight confusion over terms, I found arguments across the book clearly and accessibly made. Overall, the book's tone is refreshingly optimistic about what is being done around the world to pioneer approaches to educational assessment which are humane, helpful to learner and teacher, and serviceable to society. In other words, entirely unlike those which pupils and students in England and Wales currently endure.

Gergen and Gill found their argument on two contrasting conceptions of schooling. The school as factory is set against the school as conversation. A factory model of schooling uses high-stakes summative testing to ensure the system functions properly (in its own terms) and the quality of the 'product' is reliable. Such a model privileges individual performance as against that of the collective, thereby generating conditions of oppressive individual accountability rather than productive responsibility. This individualised, top-down, measurement-obsessed approach is set against a conception of school as 'conversations-in-motion'. Conversation is mobilised as a metaphor for schooling because a conversation is relational and co-creative. The authors urge that, since it is within human relationships that meanings are made, knowledge constructed and reconstructed, and values arrived at and contested, human relationships are at the heart of the educational process in school. Furthermore, they seek to 'replace the traditional idea of a relationship as composed of independent persons with a vision of relational process from which individuals emerge as who they are' (p33).

The authors note the need to re-learn 'generative' ways of relating, and not least how to disagree without offending. They have advice to give and examples to share about how to manage disagreement constructively. They acknowledge that education is embedded in power-relationships, and recognise that dialogue established with the best intentions can nevertheless generate hostility and antagonism. They have faith in thoroughgoing democracy, want all voices heard and responsibility collectively shared. Those who

hold that a clash of arguments in conversation can work to refine truth rather than symbolically 'annihilate the other' (p188) may need to hold their peace.

It is all too obvious, at least in England, that, as the authors write, 'test performance is becoming the very purpose of education' (p. vii). Human values are driven to the margins when pupils and students are recast as data-points. The current high-stakes summative testing regime grinds out results, and when it can't – as in the 2020 GCSE crisis – panic ensues among the powers-that-be. Government, and its administrative bureaucracy, has long scorned any approach to formal educational assessment other than the snapshot summative high-stakes test. Those who laud and defend the exam-mill, and claim such testing is fairer than any other system, must close their mind to the influence on learning of a student's experience and conditions of life, and disregard the importance for learning of students' individual interests, their degree of anxiety in the face of the test, their particular responses to the range of pedagogical approaches they have met with, and so on. In making these arguments, the authors bleakly note the misery exams inflict upon cohorts of students, the constraining effect test-readying has on the curriculum offer made by teachers, and the way such readying crimps and confines pedagogical practice. They contend that '[o]ur tradition of educational assessment damages relationships, undermines well-being, and radically constrains the potentials for learning' (p50). Summative exams create 'hierarchies of worth' (p43) which have a lasting impact on the way young people regard themselves and are regarded. These hierarchies help shape the nature of the educational experiences students are offered.

All this is in keeping with the 'neoliberal assumptions' (p5) which work to fashion education as a product and to instrumentalise what it means:

> [M]easurement of the product has come to determine the value of the system. As education becomes less about engagement in learning and more about succeeding in tests, it is stripped of any other value or meaning. Whether the educational process enhances creative potential, curiosity, moral sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation, a sense of justice, openness to others who differ, or capacities to collaborate with peers, is of minor significance. Or worse, such considerations only matter as they are related to test performance. (p6)

Gergen and Gill hope to inspire transformation in the human relationships which, they urge, are at the heart of successful education. Against the ever-grinding exam-mill, they advance no single alternative model. Rather, they explain and explore what they mean by 'relational evaluation' as it pertains to young people busy learning in primary and secondary phases, to the evaluation of teachers, to schools, and to the education system as a whole. They draw on theory (including their own previous work) and on a range of real-world examples of pedagogical practice where an understanding of 'the relational'

has been used to change practices and attitudes. Just as schools are better seen not as managed structures but as dynamic conversations and active living processes of relating, assessment is better understood (as Eliot Eisner has also suggested) not as measurement-based judgement but as the process of 'valuing'. That is, as evaluation, a process which breathes life into learning.

So they propose 'three central goals of relational evaluation … to *enhance the process of learning* … to *inspire sustained engagement in learning*, and … to *enrich the process of relating*' (p53; original emphasis). They argue that 'enhancing learning' currently has no place in assessment in schools, for measurement-based approaches are ancillary to learning. Their approach offers an ethical basis for assessment as against traditional approaches which 'undermine trust, friendship, and authenticity and lend themselves to anxiety, alienation, and antagonism' (p57).

What might relational evaluation look like? Practical examples in use in schools offer a glimpse. They include enhanced scope for listening to student voices, reflective dialogue, collaborative inquiry, documentation and archiving. Schools successfully draw on student-led reviews, portfolios, records of achievement and varieties of presentation and reflection. Such approaches make it possible to illustrate individual development in learning over time, and to enable multiple perspectives to come to bear on a student's learning processes and growth. One hallmark of 'relational evaluation' is an expansion of what is to be understood as 'educational progress'. An expanded understanding entails a more commensurate ability to make such progress visible in and for each student: not measuring learning, but measuring-up to it.

Further chapters explore the implications and ramifications of 'relational evaluation' at primary and secondary phases, for teachers as well as students, and for schools as a whole. In the authors' view: '[R]esponsibility for learning should never reside in the individual; it is a collective achievement. Thus, to define the quality of teachers' work in terms of student outcomes disregards the ways in which students are active participants in their own learning … to say nothing of classroom relationships, family, economic conditions, and so on' (p113).

Against a version of teaching reconfigured in the neoliberal capitalist order as delivery, instruction and transmission (and in which the teacher is only valuable insofar as she or he fulfils their function as deliverer, instructor, transmitter) the authors champion a version which returns to teachers the intrinsic value of their work. Teaching is seen as responsible co-creation, and teachers as expert at what they do. This means that: 'The primary source of development should take place within the teaching community itself. The major repository of wisdom and knowledge about teaching lies within this community. In sharing stories, values, opinions, and practices' (p115).

The antidote to top-down approaches develops, as ever, from the bottom up, among those who do the actual work.

A concluding pair of chapters address several obvious objections to the implementation of 'relational evaluation' in practice system-wide. How can adequate time be made for it? Can it be suitably rigorous? How may national standards be upheld? How can it mesh with the need to select a cohort to enter higher education? Further debate will strengthen arguments here, especially as regards the degree of faith to be placed in digital technology as a solution. And since issues of 'assessment' are inextricably bound up with issues of curriculum and of pedagogy, debate will further ramify into these areas. Gergen and Gill already challenge what they see as the outmoded notion of 'essential knowledge', currently such a driver of government policy, along with its inevitable institutionalisation in standardised curricula. They support emergent and inquiry-based approaches, and list examples of schools around the world where this happens. They also advocate the idea of a school as a learning community which 'expands learning to beyond students, teachers, and administrators. Parents, caretakers, neighbours, businesses, local government, and other stakeholders are invited in as learning partners' (p161).

In her book *Assessing Children's Learning*, Mary Jane Drummond shows how any consideration of educational assessment or evaluation must begin not with questions about how and when to assess, but with questions about why. The question 'why assess?' implies the deeper question of 'why educate?', for to do justice to our pupils and students through the act of educational assessment, which is their right, we must understand our purposes as educators and our hopes for those we teach. Currently dominant forms of assessment, enacted daily in the exam-mill, fail to value so much about children and young people as learners, and about their learning. A conference-invitation I recently received gave proof yet again of the malaise which locks us down. Among the papers to be given was one called: 'Re-imagining assessment: measuring student performance following Covid-19'. Another promised to help me improve my 'delivery of online learning', while a third spoke of 'effective' curriculum design. Meanwhile, MPs and their advisers lament the 'amount' of learning 'lost' because of the pandemic and urge pupils to 'catch up'. This vocabulary, and the conception of learning and of young people as learners which it articulates, offers nothing for those who understand educational assessment as a subtle and continuing activity in which the significance of the learner's meaning-making needs to be respected in its own terms, and the learner's thinking itself thought about. Against the rush to return the state education system in England and Wales to the way it used to be, with all the educational harm which attends life in the exam-mill – 'assessment as learning', in Harry Torrance's phrase – Gergen and Gill's book offers a highly-readable, provocative set of arguments for a better way.

Patrick Yarker

The crisis of the meritocracy: Britain's transition to mass education since the Second World War

PETER MANDLER, 2020

Oxford: Oxford University Press

361pp, hardback, £25, ISBN 9780198840145

Cambridge historian Peter Mandler has a fundamentally optimistic story to tell about the growth of universal education in Britain over the last seventy years and one can sense his stubborn resistance to any more sceptical interpretation on almost every page of this dense and impressive history. Since the close of the 'people's war' in 1945, Mandler argues, we have witnessed the rise of mass education, initially at secondary level, and more recently in higher education where participation rates currently nudge New Labour's much vaunted promise of 50 per cent. Contrary to established narratives that have put this development down to economic growth or significant pieces of legislation, Mandler identifies the expansion of educational opportunity as the result of a constantly shifting interplay of demand and supply that has reinforced 'the deepening compact between the individual citizen and the state which came with formal democracy and the idea of equal citizenship'. Education continues to be seen by the public as one of the 'decencies' of life'; hence the inexorable rise in demand for what Mandler often refers to as 'more and better'.

In short, the people (sort of) did it themselves.

On the face of it, this is an attractive proposition, yet one that is oddly tricky to grapple with, given the mass of contradictory or partial information available to us concerning what the 'people' have wanted at any given historical moment or, indeed, who exactly the people are. Mandler deliberately employs 'a promiscuous array of methods and sources', sifting through realms of evidence from official publications, interviews, academic studies, pollsters' findings and demographic surveys in an attempt to clarify the complex relationship between government policy, public demand and social change. This promiscuity encourages him to prosecute his subsidiary critique of the alleged tendency of academic disciplines to work in unhelpful silos. Economists and social scientists, he charges, have paid scant attention to educational expansion while educationists and political historians tend to 'chop up long-term trends into short political segments' with many on the left falling into a 'declinist narrative' in which the failures of a 'divided' Labour party feature heavily as a reason for a lack of genuine progress (an analysis Mandler anyway rejects). But we shall return to the problem of we whingeing progressives in a moment.

Despite his disapproval of an oversimplified reliance on conventional political and legislative history, the familiar building blocks are here: the 1944 Act, the establishment

 DOI: 10.3898/FORUM.2021.63.2.20

of the tripartite system that soon became a bipartite system (largely for lack of resources, and the unwillingness of local authorities to spend twice over, on both secondary moderns and technical schools, for the majority already officially deemed second rate), and then the slow transition to comprehensive education in subsequent decades.

Mandler pinpoints an extraordinary sequence, and range, of social changes that followed the end of the war, including an optimistic explosion in the birth rate (rather fittingly named the 'bulge'). With it came 'the parents' revival … strongly evident in much stronger and more open-ended expectations for children's future lives'. Like health, education came to be seen as a right of citizenship in a welfare state democracy, a right that sat uneasily with the grammar/secondary modern divide, a sorting process that worked largely along lines of social class and soon became unacceptable to the majority of the public who were tasting the benefits of expanded opportunities for the first time. Thus the hopes and assumptions of mass democracy clashed directly with the tenets of a relative new meritocracy inaugurated through selective education.

It is fascinating to plunge into the detail of how the different parts of the political establishment at first resisted and then accommodated the people's hunger for fairness. Rab Butler was immensely proud of 'his' 1944 Act, with the more far-sighted members of the Tory establishment seeing its implementation as a neat adjustment to the new social order: a meritocratic twist on mass democracy. For them, of course, it left untouched the privileges of the upper class (who continued to use private education) while providing a more fitting state education for the middle class and a route up for the clever 'scholarship boy' (it was more often a boy). Labour was fundamentally divided, as it had been pre-war, between those, such as the Fabians and the radical left-wing MP Ellen Wilkinson, who welcomed grammar schools as a precious opportunity for clever working-class children and as a way to create a technocratic elite, and those who saw through the hollow claims of 'parity of esteem' and believed that education should function as a broad and inclusive highway.

Mandler's unsparing scrutiny of primary sources makes for some interesting discoveries, as when he looks more closely at the findings of Mark Abrams, an influential pollster who did a lot of work for the Labour Party in the 1950s and 1960s. Surveying working-class attitudes to selection, Abrams deliberately distorted his survey results to conclude that, with a few exceptions, working-class parents cared little for their children's education, and that any perceived clamour for grammar school education (the form of secondary education – then, as now – represented as the 'best') was just a psychological defence against their own inadequacy. The working class, Abrams claimed, was merely aping its middle-class betters and using the 11-plus as a 'convenient scapegoat'.

From the off, Mandler is eager to puncture what he sees as the myth that comprehensive reform was largely the result of Labour's famous Circular 65. But surely

it has long been recognised that many local authorities, both Tory and Labour, more sensitive than national politicians to popular sentiment on the ground (as well as cost considerations), were beginning to move towards all-in schools in the post-war period? (Anglesey had advanced its own plans for the 'common school' as early as 1936.) In its requirement that the remaining local authorities put forward plans for reorganisation, Harold Wilson's Labour administration was picking up on this groundswell of local change rather than leading from the front; and it is useful to be reminded here just how many of the leading players from that Labour government were staunch supporters of grammar schools.

Down the decades, the pro-grammar school lobby has all but disappeared from within the Labour party and sits uneasily within contemporary 'free school' Conservatism. Theresa May, whose attempt to expand selective education was a centrepiece of her lacklustre and truncated premiership, does not even merit an entry in Mandler's index. Indeed, he rather too quickly brushes away the continuation, and subsequent expansion, of selective education, in places like Buckinghamshire, Kent and parts of Lincolnshire where every year thousands of children sit the 11-plus (more like the 10-plus) to this day. He treats them as irrelevant scraps of a long-discredited system, perhaps because they do not fit his overall schema of popular rejection of selection. But why, one is left wondering, did the swell of public opinion that swept away grammar schools across the country in the decades after the war, never reach these areas, and does not reach them still, in the early 21st century?

Mandler also never explains how popular tolerance of private education fits his thesis of a people who have increasingly demanded 'more is better' down the decades. Mandler rather insouciantly sets the question of private schools aside, preferring to concentrate on those mechanisms that brought 'more' to the mass of the population, such as the rise in the school-leaving age or the introduction of GCSEs, and, in a series of alternating chapters, the growing appetite for higher education. Here he identifies some interesting stops and starts in popular demand, such as a prolonged and somewhat mysterious pause during the 1970s, when it seemed that many qualified students did not choose higher education. (As a teenager during this period, I can testify that going to university was neither the obligatory, nor indeed the eye-wateringly expensive, path that it had become, by the late 1990s and early 2000s, for my daughters' generation.) But student – or perhaps, parental – demand for higher education returned with a vengeance in the 1980s, despite a failed attempt by the ever-hapless Keith Joseph to keep numbers down. Mandler puts the continuing steady rise in numbers to a complex alchemy of factors, including the (now somewhat diluted) graduate premium, the view of higher education as an increasingly consumerist right, the university experience becoming seen as a newly desirable stage in adult socialisation and, last but not least, a good old-fashioned desire to study a particular subject in depth. Periodic attempts by

the government, including this current one, to ramp up STEM subjects and scale back on the arts have previously backfired as students stubbornly continue to find meaning and enjoyment in the humanities and social sciences.

For all its wealth of fascinating information and beady-eyed interpretation, there are several notable lacunae in this supposedly all-encompassing account of the formation of our modern educational system. 'More is better' is Mandler's most frequently expressed motif, but it clearly falls outside his remit to consider if more actually *is* better. Education over the last seventy years has clearly moved far from being 'a right of citizenship in a welfare state democracy' to becoming more of a means of producing human capital through and for a competitive market economy. Mandler is more concerned with charting the mechanisms of this change than the problems it poses for a rich, meaningful education. Despite successive claims by governments of both major parties to be fostering 'rising standards', the experience of primary, secondary and, increasingly, university education is reported to be sterile, stressful and still unequal by large numbers of sector leaders, teachers, parents and students alike. Similarly, the near wholesale move towards academisation, a form of soft privatisation that might well yet flower into full for-profit education, is treated only as a newly welcome structural variant.

FORUM readers, in particular, will be dismayed by Mandler's ungenerous treatment of the post-war progressive tradition. It is unsettling to read a history of modern education that affords several lengthy mentions to the policy twists and turns of post-war Tory minister David Eccles, for example, but makes no reference at all to a giant such as Brian Simon, whose work played such a vital role in promoting a vision of a genuinely rich, inclusive education, building and sustaining that democratic 'structure of feeling' that brought comprehensive education into being. For Mandler, it seems, there are largely two key groups in play: The People, whose views are here given expression in polls and surveys; and The Political Leaders, who thrash about, getting it right-ish eventually (a rather Johnsonian vision, as it happens). Interestingly, for a scholar who explicitly argues, at the outset, how important it is to gauge those social influences that cannot always be measured, he himself fails even to attempt to assess the influence and significance of an entire layer of campaigns, organisations, writings, journals and individuals whose persuasive arguments for greater equality influenced politicians and public alike, and so contributed to the very changes that this social history celebrates. Sadly, Mandler's wholesale dismissiveness of the progressive left is again reflected in his treatment of a cohort of radical educational historians who have critiqued the development of policy, particularly in the post-Thatcherite period, but are here relegated to a series of footnotes: a derided list of proponents of an illegitimate 'declinist' tradition.

However, even Mandler cannot escape the downsides of contemporary education in

a final section that critiques the obsessive shibboleth of our age: that education is, or can be, the fundamental motor force of social mobility. Following on, as everyone does, from the groundbreaking work of British sociologist John Goldthorpe, he reminds us that social mobility in the post-war period was largely down to economic expansion rather than the establishment of grammar schools. Since the late 1990s, in place of tackling growing economic inequality, politicians of both parties, and the wider political class, have persistently and inaccurately claimed that education is the principal mechanism for individual and broader advancement.

And what of meritocracy and its supposed crisis? Yes, we saw the defeat of the crude bi-partism of the post-war period and now have a largely comprehensive system, but as Mandler's final chapter heading concedes we still have 'effectively maintained educational inequality'. Everything from private education to continuing selection, including more covert forms of social selection, perpetuate a clear hierarchy of provision, while growing poverty has intensified social and therefore educational segregation. Streaming is well entrenched at both primary and secondary level, sorting children by social class from as young as three-years-old, while the 'attainment gap' remains stubbornly fixed and is, once again, post-Covid, growing. More young people are going to university, but employers clearly discriminate in favour of the graduates from top institutions as well as 'over rewarding the cultural capital of privileged applicants'.

Mandler dwells little on these inconvenient remnants or perhaps more subtle renewals of meritocracy. This allows him to conclude, if with untypical tentativeness, that ' "The best for all" remains a potent formula in a democracy that feels vulnerable but seeks security"'. An important formula to be sure, but one that, despite many advances over the decades, remains far from genuine fulfilment.

Melissa Benn